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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KWMN](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: RESPONSE TO CALL FOR NOMINATIONS: 2008 SECRETARY'S
AWARD FOR INTERNATIONAL WOMEN OF COURAGE

REF: A. STATE 126072

- [1](#)B. TUNIS 1044
- [1](#)C. TUNIS 986
- [1](#)D. TUNIS 293
- [1](#)E. TUNIS 708
- [1](#)F. 06 TUNIS 1658

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) Embassy Tunis is pleased to nominate Samia Abbou for the Secretary's Award for International Women of Courage.

Secretary Rice remarked on International Women's Day that the day commemorates women, "who are the international defenders of what President Bush has called the non-negotiable demands of human dignity." When Samia's husband Mohamed Abbou was convicted of "defaming the judiciary" in 2005, after he posted articles online critical of President Ben Ali (he was released on July 24, see Refs B and C), Samia had many options. She could have chosen to remain quiet, avoided the spotlight, and actively distanced herself from civil society activists. She did not. Instead, she choose to highlight her husband's cause in the international arena, calling attention to freedom of expression and association issues as well as prison conditions. Her work personifies the defense of human dignity, and her dedication, courage, and leadership in this cause have made her an example and an inspiration. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) During Mohamed Abbou's two-year incarceration in El Kef prison (he was released on July 24, see Refs B and C), Samia Abbou was subject to regular police harassment and surveillance (Refs D,E, and F). For example, Samia was routinely followed by plainclothes policemen, who were also stationed outside her home. On occasion, someone would rattle her doors and windows late at night frightening her young children. Police would stop her frequently during her weekly drives to El Kef prison (a two hour drive from Tunis), where her husband was incarcerated. Harrassment would notably escalate whenever Samia took action to promote her husband's cause, such as meeting with US Embassy officials or international NGOs.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Though worried for herself and her family, Samia found the courage to become an international spokesperson for freedom of expression and prisoner's rights to call attention to her husband's cause. For example, on October 16, 2006, Samia Abbou rallied the wives of other political prisoners for a one-day hunger-strike to protest their husband's continued detention. Following the hunger-strike, police harassment and surveillance of Samia Abbou and her family dramatically increased, but Samia

continued to speak out. Mohamed Abbou's case received a significant amount of international attention, and much of that is due to Samia's work as a spokesperson. Her work drew attention not only to her husband's case, but to the challenges faced by civil society activists in general.

¶4. (SBU) It is important to note that Samia Abbou balanced the demands of activism with the challenges of suddenly acting as a single parent. She was a source of compassion and strength to not only her own family as well as to the many families that found themselves in similar situations. It takes a lot of courage to do what Samia Abbou did, and she did most of it on her own. Samia is currently focusing on obtaining her law degree and license to practice law. The legal profession will be lucky to gain a talented, eloquent, and dedicated defender of human rights.

¶5. (SBU) While Samia says that her husband's release was, "the present of a lifetime," the Embassy feels that it is important to formally recognize her contributions to the advancement of civil liberties in Tunisia. Freedom of expression is a central element of any democracy, and as such is an important element of post's democracy promotion strategy. Post's efforts are most effective in conjunction with the efforts of local activists, of which there is a small but dedicated cadre. Samia and Mohamed Abbou are, while not young, among the younger members of this group, and have the potential to become the leaders of a new generation of activists. They undoubtedly have a long career ahead of them, but in the meantime, post feels that it is important to recognize that Samia Abbou did what she did, at great personal cost, simply because it was the right thing to do.

Biographic Information

¶6. (SBU)

Full Legal Name: Samia Hammouda Abbou
Job Title/ Association: Student
DOB: November 3, 1965
Country of Birth: Tunisia
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¶7. (SBU) Samia Abbou was notified of her nomination.
DESJARDINS